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SUBJECT: ALGERIA: 2009 COUNTRY REPORTS ON TERRORISM

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11. (U) The security situation in Algeria was marked by a decrease in the number of high-profile terrorist attacks throughout the country, although ongoing low-level terrorist activities, comparable to guerilla insurgency operations, continued in non-urban areas. Previously, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which formally affiliated with al-Qa'ida in 2006 and now calls itself al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), focused on targeting Algerian government interests and had been more averse to suicide attacks and civilian casualties. Although Algerian government interests remained the primary focus of AQIM, its continued resort to kidnappings for ransom inside Algeria and expansion of such operations against westerners in the Sahel region confirmed AQIM's continued embrace of tactics imported from Iraq and Afghanistan. Algerian government counterterrorism operations, which included an increased security presence and the dismantling of support and recruitment networks, restrained AQIM's capacity to conduct high-profile attacks, particularly in major Algerian cities. There have been no suicide bombings since March. The month of Ramadan, typically a period of frequent attacks, remained quiet. Nevertheless, AQIM carried out lethal operations, using ambushes and roadside bombs against government and civilian targets, particularly in the Kabylie region east of Algiers, and increased its terrorist activities along the Algerian-Malian border. The information in this report is derived from Algerian press reporting.

12. (U) Two events in recent years helped heighten concerns about terrorism in Algeria: the September 2006 merger of elements of the GSPC with al-Qa'ida (AQ) to form AQIM and the conclusion of the amnesty period for Algeria's Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation in August 2006. National reconciliation remains a contentious issue for many Algerians, who are still divided over whether amnesty and re-integration or a more aggressive, unforgiving approach to terrorism is the best way to address the continuing threat. Although the Charter has officially expired, its terms may still be applied on a case-by-case basis at the exclusive discretion of the Algerian president.

13. (SBU) Following the September 11, 2006, announcement of affiliation with AQ, AQIM began to increase threats against what it termed "crusading" westerners, particularly American and French citizens, although English, Swiss, Chinese, Russians, Ukrainians, Danes, Austrians, Italian, Spanish, and Canadians have been targeted as well. Even before its

official affiliation with AQ, the GSPC was an organization whose regional and international ties were expanding. AQIM support cells have been discovered and dismantled in Spain, Italy, Morocco, Mauritania, and Mali, and AQIM maintained training camps and support networks in northern Mali.

¶4. (U) The year was punctuated with several high-profile terrorist attacks:

On March 9, two people were killed when an AQIM suicide bomber attacked a communal guard post in Tadmaït, 70km east of Algiers.

On June 17, AQIM killed 18 officers in an attack against a gendarme escort guarding a group of Chinese workers near Bordj Bou Arreridj, east of Algiers.

On July 29, AQIM killed 23 soldiers in an ambush against a military supply convoy near Damous, 150km west of Algiers.

On August 4, terrorists injured 25 people, including four police officers, in a vehicle borne IED at a police station in Tizi Ouzou, east of Algiers.

On October 22, terrorists killed seven and wounded three Algerian security guards working for a Canadian water project.

¶5. (SBU) The majority of attacks have occurred in rural and suburban areas. Terrorists have been very careful to establish remote bases, communicate sparingly, and carry out meticulously-planned attacks. AQIM does not have significant popular support and is not assessed as strong enough to bring down the Algerian government. AQIM appears aware of the need to avoid civilian casualties, but this has been difficult to accomplish as its police and military targets often operate among civilians. When security forces are in the countryside, approaching terrorists often stand out and are intercepted before they can successfully complete their attacks. Roadside bombs and ambushes persist despite the

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efforts of the security forces. The combination of a population weary of civilian casualties from over a decade of Islamic terrorist violence and the growing availability and use of cell phones has made the terrorists more vulnerable to detection and attack by the police. At the same time, the Algerian government has had limited success in reducing unemployment, which unofficially is more than 25 percent, or in implementing significant economic reforms. This has contributed to a slow but steady recruitment rate for AQIM and criminal gangs in general.

¶6. (U) AQIM's strategy in Algeria appears to be influenced by AQ's experience in Iraq. AQIM has issued directions, following massive suicide attacks in 2007, to avoid civilian deaths, and attacks since have been concentrated once more on military, police and foreign national targets. AQIM is likely seeking to disrupt business and commercial activity and probably uses such attacks to discourage foreign investment. The overall civilian death toll due to terrorist attacks has been declining in recent years. During the civil war that began in 1992 and had largely subsided by 2000, Algerian Islamic terrorists killed on average more than 10,000 people a year, with the majority being civilians--well over ten times the yearly number of AQIM victims today. The relative lack of civilian dead enables the new generation of Algerian terrorists to publicize their actions more energetically.

¶7. (SBU) In the past, Algerian security services have expressed concern about AQIM using propaganda based on the call to fight in Iraq as a hook to recruit young people, many of whom never made it to Iraq but were redirected towards joining local groups. In previous years, AQIM propaganda videos originating in Algeria were of amateur quality and

poorly produced. This has changed dramatically. It was evident that AQIM has placed a greater emphasis on improving the quality of the videos, and these videos and communiques were orchestrated to attract Algerian youth to the AQIM "cause." Several videos posted on the Internet, such as the series "Shadows of the Sword" and "Apostate Hell," showed operations conducted against Algerian military and security targets that included preparations for the attacks and pre-briefings with the commanders that led the attacks. The ability to conduct an attack and claim responsibility via communique within hours demonstrated the importance AQIM placed in transmitting its message in an attempt to win the media war.

¶8. (SBU) Criminal activities, such as holdups of motorists at roadblocks on remote roads (often disguised to look like security forces roadblocks), armed robbery, and kidnapping of Algerian citizens remain critical to funding operations of the cash-strapped AQIM units located in northern Algeria. Kidnapping of westerners in the Sahel region, to include the most recent kidnappings in Mali and Mauritania, underscore how AQIM's semi-autonomous units in the Sahel have come to rely on the revenues from ransoming westerners to provide cash infusions into the overall network intended to finance local operations and those in northern Algeria. The use of suicide car bombs, suicide vests, and other improvised explosive devices by Algerian terrorists continues to indicate a significant level of AQIM inspiration by, if not cooperation and training with, terrorists from abroad. The increasingly sophisticated tactics used in Iraq have had a profound effect on the level of organization and sophistication employed by terrorists in Algeria. Funding for AQIM remains problematic, especially in the north of Algeria. As noted above, AQIM relies heavily on kidnapping for ransom (in Algeria and the Sahel), extortion, and smuggling in southern Algeria/northern Mali. The latter activities may involve the regional trade in narcotics, although information is mostly anecdotal and fragmentary. Individual AQIM cells in Europe likely also provide support through small-scale funding.

¶9. (SBU) It has been estimated that Algerian security forces killed, wounded, or arrested nearly 1,300 terrorists in 2009, compared to an estimated combined figure of about 1,000 for ¶2008. (Note: These figures are entirely based on press accounts, usually drawn from information passed to reporters by the GOA. It is hard to verify them independently. The difficulty of accepting these figures on their face is due to the fact that they come close to exceeding most estimates of the actual number of active AQIM fighters still operating in northern Algeria. End note) The counterterrorism successes of the Algerian services, combined with the public rejection of terrorism, possibly reduced AQIM's overall effectiveness during the past two years. The Algerian government hosted a meeting of the military chiefs of staff from Mali, Libya,

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Mauritania, and Niger in August to develop a regional counterterrorism strategy and establish a regional command center in the southern Algerian city of Tamanrasset. Algeria also proposed language for part of a UN Security Council resolution that would criminalize the payment of ransoms to terrorist groups in exchange for kidnapping victims. During 2008, the government of Algeria instituted a program to hire 100,000 new police and gendarme officers, reinforce the borders, augment security at airports, and increase the overall security presence in major cities. The initiative was effective in reducing the impact of terrorist incidents and also demonstrated the government of Algeria's determination to fight terrorism.

¶10. (SBU) AQIM, thanks in part to high unemployment among Algerian youth, was partially successful in replenishing its numbers after the arrest or death of an estimated 1,300 terrorists. Those remaining appeared to be more hard-line and resistant to the government's amnesty offer. Despite

continued AQIM attacks, the overall security situation remained greatly improved from the situation of the late 1990s. That said, the Algerian military and security forces must continuously adapt to AQIM's changing tactics and accept that an organization that had primarily been a local threat now has a reach that extends to the surrounding region and has international ties. Algerian security and military forces remained capable of handling a prolonged effort against internal terrorist threats and were a reliable counterterrorism partner.

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JORDAN